

How North Korea-Mongolia Relations Have Jump-started the Korean Peninsula Peace Process

By Alicia Campi

Mongolia's diplomacy with North Korea, based on a long history of close relations between the two countries, has been a significant factor in the new atmosphere on the Korean peninsula. Mongolia believes that it faces common problems with Pyongyang, such as uncomfortable economic dependence on border neighbors — China and Russia — and geographical isolation from greater Asia. Landlocked Mongolia's diversification of trade partners through its own "Third Neighbor" policy (to cultivate ties with countries beyond its two border neighbors to counterbalance their economic and political influence) is connected to its self-interest, but also could serve as a diplomatic bridge by unlocking North Korea as a rail transit route and port to the Pacific for Mongolia's rich mineral resources. For Pyongyang, ties with Mongolia could open new forms of economic modernization and benefit from Mongolia's experience in attracting donor assistance and foreign investment while leveraging its "small nation" status in regional politics. Newly elected Mongolian President Khaltmaagi Battulga recently invited Chairman Kim to make a state visit to Mongolia to celebrate the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations.

Mongolia has under-appreciated bilateral relations with North Korea. Mongolia was the second country to recognize North Korea, and Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Un's grandfather, visited Mongolia twice. The countries have economic bonds which include Mongolian investment in a North Korean Sungri crude refinery in the Rason City Special Economic Zone, IT exchanges, and development of massive stockbreeding grass zones in DPRK's Kangwon province. Thousands of North Koreans have worked in medical and acupuncture clinics, cashmere factories, road construction, and restaurants in Mongolia's capital of Ulaanbaatar, and plans were formulated to utilize this population, rather than Chinese, in rail and mining projects. An agreement beginning in 2008 permitted North Korea to provide Mongolia with as many as 5,300 workers over a five year period. These workers left the country in 2018 due to the pressure of international sanctions. The Mongols tested rail shipping of 25,000 tons of coal to North Korea's Rajin port in 2015–2016 and are ready to use this new route to Japanese and South Korean customers as soon as the international climate permits.

Mongolia also has had a little-known role in facilitating American and other countries' relations with the isolated country. Envisioning Mongolia as a "New Helsinki," former President Elbegdorj made a four-day state visit to Pyongyang in 2013 to offer his country as a potential facilitator between North Korea, South Korea, Japan, and the United States. In addition to promising to expand bilateral ties, he became the first head of state to visit the Demilitarized Zone in Panmunjom and the first foreign leader to deliver a lecture (emphasizing the benefits of democracy) at Kim Il Sung University. Subsequently, in 2014 Ulaanbaatar was the reunification site of Japanese abductees with relatives. Such mediation assistance continues, as evidenced by the December 2018 visit to Tokyo of Mongolian

Dr. Alicia Campi, President of The Mongolia Society, explains that "Envisioning Mongolia as a "New Helsinki," former President Elbegdorj made a four-day state visit to Pyongyang in 2013 to offer his country as a potential facilitator between North Korea, South Korea, Japan, and the United States."

abductees was raised with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The Mongolian government organized a secret May 21, 2014, meeting in Ulaanbaatar between DPRK Deputy Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho and Robert Einhorn, former Obama administration special adviser for nonproliferation and arms control at the State Department; Joel Wit, an ex-State Department official who was a senior fellow of the US-Korea Institute at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies; and Robert Carlin, a former Central Intelligence Agency analyst.

Bilateral and regional diplomacy, investment, cooperation, and outreach have not prevented Mongolia from publicly opposing Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program and quietly providing temporary asylum for North Korean defectors. Starting in 2004, some South Korean civil society and religious groups offered to construct camps in Mongolia to house North Korean refugees, but the Mongolian government refused permission. In 2006 it was reported in the media that 500 North Korean defectors were entering Mongolia each month, but by June 2007 Mongolia had begun to turn them away. During the President Elbegdorj era (2009-2017), the issue of North Korean refugees was publicly downplayed further, although it is known that some of them who reached Mongolia were repatriated to South Korea.

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Mongolia's most publicized North Korea-related initiative is the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asia Security (UBD). The UBD, initiated by Elbegdorj and now supported by Battulga, has met annually five times at the Track 1.5 level, wherein nonstate actors including academics and researchers mix with official decision makers under the Chatham House Rule, so participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker is revealed. The DPRK has participated in the UBD three times, including in 2018. According to one of the Mongolian officials organizing the meetings, Ambassador Dr. Damba Ganbat, Mongolia is in a unique position to act as an honest broker for peace and security in Northeast Asia, and Ulaanbaatar is the perfect place for a constructive dialogue between otherwise hostile countries. Mongolia, excluded from the Six-Party Talks, has long believed that the Korean situation festered for decades because the region lacks a security dialogue mechanism. Dr. Tsedendamba Batbayar, a former Mongolian Ambassador to Cuba and Northeast Asia specialist speaking at a 2014 CSIS forum in Washington, DC examining "Mongolia's Diplomacy with the Two Koreas," explained that the Mongols realized that it was time to become a regional actor, utilizing its relations with the DPRK to open a new way of development and establish new dialogue channels.

Such diplomatic activism also was designed to raise Mongolia's international image and advance Mongolia's Economic Transit Corridor strategy, which is geared toward facilitating trade between its border neighbors in such a way as to participate in broader Asian infrastructure projects such as the Mongolian-Russian-Chinese Northern Railway and Asian Super Energy Grid. Mongolian efforts to jump-start the moribund Korean peace process by exercising cooperative trust-building as a mediator on the Korean peninsula and by offering to be a summit venue have been welcomed by the Trump administration. They have reinforced the idea of Mongolia as a willing problem solver in Asia which, as a non-nuclear-weapon state, is positioned to act as a possible peacemaker on a neutral meeting ground, which Mongols like to label as Northeast Asia's Geneva or Helsinki.

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